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Juniper Hill: Continued

Tatiana Szeftel

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Abstract

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Keywords

Mythril; Mythopoeic; Fiction; Juniper Hill; Blackbird Pie; Tatiana Szeftel

JUNIPER HILL

Tatiana Szeftel

BLACKBIRD PIE

Nicholas Silverseed, the son of a magician, has from his long-absent father a coming-of-age gift: a birthday sneeze. Nicholas aspires to become the Royal Bard of Southmarsh, and to this end has taken service at the court of King Toby. On his travels before arriving at Thornybrooke Castle, Nicholas has observed ominous flocks of blackbirds heading northward.

In the castle, King Toby's daughter Clarissa struggles unhappily with her embroidery. Her parents want her to wed the Grand Duke of Walton Wold and to learn to play the lute to please him. Fortunately, she meets Joan, a new serving-maid who loves to do needlework. While they plan to switch places, allowing Clarissa to get out of the castle for an hour or two a day, the windows are suddenly assaulted by blackbirds. As they crash through the windowpanes, black feathers everywhere, the girls cover their heads.

A rescue party led by Clarissa's mother Queen Elianora finds the princess examining the bodies in hopes of discovering one still alive for purposes of interrogation. The distraught Elianora orders Clarissa off with Master Pickenby for her music lesson, while she herself confronts King Toby. Her husband applauds Clarissa's mettle, so Elianora implies that unless the child learns refined behavior, no suitor will ever want to marry her. Acceding, Toby orders Clarissa kept indoors.

In the parlor, Clarissa practices. Her labors are regrettably overheard by the Grand Duke of Walton Wold, who promptly changes his mind and withdraws his suit for her hand. Elianora promptly orders Clarissa to spend three hours a day on her embroidery instead of only one. Clarissa restrains her delight. With three hours to go about in disguise as Joan, she will be able to travel to Thorn Wood and back! As for Joan herself, she looks forward to the glowing colors of embroidery thread.

Part 7

"Well, Nick, it would seem you've taken the King's words to heart," said Guy as they brushed hay from their clothes and wet their hands at the water trough. "Are you thinking of hunting out those blackbirds yourself to gain the purse of gold? I know it's a large family you have, and you could be using such a prize."

Nicholas smiled in the gloom as they walked toward the central square of the servants' village, where the meals were cooked over open fires.

"I am thinking of it," he admitted, "though I know not what I could do against a whole flock. I may look about in Thorn Wood tomorrow if I can slip away from the stable, and perhaps find some clue to their whereabouts. I must admit," he added, "that I cannot understand these strange birds. Why should they fly about the castle so oddly?"

Guy shook his head. "'Tis very strange," he agreed. "And more like a dragon than a flock of birds. But there are no more dragons in these times."

"Happily for us!" grinned Nicholas. "I'd not care to go up against a dragon."

"Oh, you'd manage somehow," said his friend. "You're sharper than Elfin Conal's sword. Never so sharp as myself, of course," he added playfully, "but then I'm not after the gold. I've no family to care for, and I'm well enough on my own." Nicholas grinned again. "And if you marry?"

"Faith, Nick, what talk is that! I'll wed no bold-eyed castle lass, and I'll not be back to Wynchingham till two years come May."

"Aye, and then you'll go wenching in Wynchingham!" laughed Nicholas. "Take care not to catch yourself in the winches of your wench's charms!"

Guy aimed a playful blow at his friend's ribs.

"Aow, mercy!" wailed Nicholas. "See how I winch with pain!"

The conversation ended in a good-natured scuffle.

"Now, remember," said Clarissa as she shot the bolt, "you must make some mistakes in the embroidery. Especially knots on the underside--I'm forever making those. I have ordered the servants not to disturb us, and my lady mother is too occupied to be bothered, so you need only go down at four o'clock to fetch up the tea. If there is any trouble, I shall attend to it upon my return."

She began to let down her hair. Joan laced her fingers nervously.

"But your Grace, what if--"

"No buts!" said Clarissa. "All adventures have their risks. There, how do I look?"

She stood barefoot before the fireplace in the too-short skirt, her immaculate hands folded beneath the too-large bodice, her shining brown hair tumbling over her shoulders.

"You look like a princess dressed as a serving-maid," said Joan truthfully,

"Your skin is too smooth and your hair is too shiny and you look too proud, even when you slouch."

Clarissa had assumed a posture that would have sent Juliana into horrified hysterics. Now she pulled a face to match.

"I'll rub some earth on my hands when I get outdoors. Or--here!" She scooped up a handful of warm ashes and began to rub them across her face. Joan let out a squeak of dismay.

"Don't do that! We'll never get them off! Earth is much easier to cleanse away. Just remember to hang your head a little. No, not like that. Just look at the ground when you walk. That's better."

Clarissa, carefully looking at the floor, edged her way toward the tapestry behind the clothespress.

"I can't walk like this," she complained. "I'll bump into something. I can't see where I'm going."

"Pretend you're carrying something you don't want to spill," suggested Joan.

"How can I run, then?"

Joan giggled. "Never mind, your Grace. I'm sure no one will notice you." She glanced at the hour glass. "And please, your Grace, don't be late!"

Clarissa grinned. "Never fear. I shall return anon!" She flourished the corner of the tapestry as she had seen the knights flourish their cloaks at the tournaments, and whipped up a spiral of dust that all but blinded her. Coughing, she managed to spring the wall panel that opened onto the scullery stairs, seldom used by the castle household and often referred to among the younger members as the "secret passage." The secret passage was the exclusive property of trysting lovers, children, pages on errands of urgency, and anyone on errands of mischief, which meant that Clarissa could have navigated it blindfold with both wrists bound behind her. As it was, she prided herself on the fact that she had used a candle for years and had never, as yet, so much as slipped.

She made her way down through the thick, musty-smelling darkness, round and round and round till the steps began to be faintly visible below her, and the scents and sounds of kitchen life to make their presences known. She proceeded cautiously to the foot of the stair and ducked into the kitchen passage branching off to her right, which led past the scullery and into the kitchen-garden. So far, so good. Probably most of the servants were busy with sunnyday chores on the castle

grounds: washing, gardening, airing the linens were all jobs that were rushed into while the good weather lasted. This meant, of course, that she would have quite a gauntlet to run once she got outdoors, but she might be able to evade the worst of it by ducking along the hedgerows.

She sidled out the scullery door and made her way across the kitchen-garden, trying to look both nonchalant and occupied, so that no one would ask her where she was off to. No one did. The gardeners did not even look up from their fragrant beds of herbs, and the beekeepers were too involved in their own preservation to pay attention to anything else.

She cut across the far end of the orchard to avoid contact with the castle women, whose laughter and sharp remarks could be heard from the little stream where they beat the clothes clean upon the rocks. King's Rill, as the stream was called, wandered down from the heart of the castle wood to join Thorn Brook several miles below Castletown.

The cool turf beneath the apple trees gave way to sun-warmed meadowgrass that reached almost to Clarissa's knees. Daisies, cowslips and gipsy's lace nodded in the breeze, stretching away toward the wood on the one side and the downs on the other. Away in the distance she could see King Toby's shepherds, small dots against the green in their blue and brown smocks, and faintly on the wind came a gentle baaing and the clink of bells.

Clarissa had never been so far from the castle, except for processions in Castletown, when she had been flanked by bodyguards and followed by ladies-in-waiting. She paused, bewildered by the new sights, sounds and scents. She was tempted to lie down among the flowers, but she caught herself and turned resolutely toward the wood. Today she must search for the blackbirds and, if possible, find out why they were attacking the castle. Later, there would be time to explore.

She slowed to a walk as she passed the first copses. If the blackbirds were here, there was no need to call their attention to any intruder. Certainly they would be aware of her presence long before she discovered them. She picked her way carefully along between the trees, trying to make as little noise as possible.

At first glance, however, the wood seemed friendly enough. What birds there were twittered cheerfully at her from the oaks and beeches; small creatures scuttled into hiding as she went by. Sunlight dappled the dead leaves and bracken with bright patterns, turning the tree trunks a warm, rich brown. Here and there she passed bramble bushes crowned with blossom, and wondered what fruits they would bear later. It was a shame, in fact, that they weren't bearing now: she was getting hungry, and there was nothing in sight to eat. She hoped she would at least find a stream. -- She tipped her head, listening. Yes, there was no doubt of it: she heard running water up ahead. Well, at least she would have something to drink! And a chance to soak her feet, which were

sore and scratched from the undergrowth. She quickened her pace, pushed through a tangle of bushes in her path and found herself in a cool, mossy glen starred with buttercups and widow's weed. Holly gleamed darkly among the ashes and the ivy-bound hazels; there was no sound but for the song of the brook, which chattered gaily almost at her feet, tumbling down a little cleft at one end of the glen and humming off into the undergrowth.

Clarissa looked down at the water where it bubbled out of sight at the rim of the glen, and caught her breath. For there was one more detail of this enchanted place that she had not noticed before, and that was that she was not alone in it. On the other side of the stream, with his back to an old oak root, sat a lean, tanned boy whose straight, black hair fell to the collar of his faded jerkin. His long, brown fingers held a flute, which he had apparently been about to put to his lips, but his dark eyes were fixed on her with surprise, wariness and, she noticed uncomfortably, curiosity. Snapping snuff-boxes! she thought, what now?

Nicholas regarded the newcomer and, for once, found himself at a loss for words. She had appeared as if out of nowhere; certainly he had not heard her approach. His first inclination had been to be annoyed at the intrusion, for his whistle was nearly finished, and with it he hoped to lure a blackbird. But he could see that this visitor was no common farm lass, for all her bare feet and ill-fitting clothes. And to guess from her expression, she was as taken aback as he.

They stared at each other in silence for several minutes, and then Clarissa caught her second wind.

"Who--who are you?" she asked. After all, it was her father's wood.

Nicholas had the uncomfortable feeling that he was trespassing. He also had a very uncomfortable suspicion of the girl's identity and he felt his throat go dry. He swallowed.

"I'm Nicholas Silverseed," he said, eyeing her warily, "and I was just leaving."

"No, wait!" said Clarissa. She had been thinking fast during this brown lad's reply, and she was sure that this was an elf. His distrustful manner had aroused her curiosity - that and his woodland looks. And with a name like Silverseed, who could doubt it? She must try to overcome his natural shyness.

"Please stay," she said in her most obliging tone, "I love company. I don't see many - uh - people, and I don't often get a chance to make friends."

Above all, she must not call him an elf to his face, she knew. He would disappear at once. She would have to pretend that she thought he was an ordinary farm lad.

Nicholas nodded slowly. So she was a wood sprite, and this was no doubt her glen. He had seen her stumble over the word "people", and of course it was true: she would see only animals here in the wood, along with her own kin. He was relieved that he had not offended her, but he felt uneasy. Wood sprites, from all he had heard, were unpredictable, and his position could change at any moment. Above all, he knew

he must not ask her name, or she would have him in her power for seven years. He took a deep breath.

"Very well, I'll stay," he said, with a determined glance to show her he would not be fooled by her tricks. "But," he added, to make sure she understood, "I must begin ere sundown."

"Oh, so must -" began Clarissa, and then realized that she didn't want him asking questions about her. She nodded and said lamely, "So you must."

Nicholas' smile was grim. So she was disappointed, was she? He was no fool to stay in her wood past twilight.

"Well!" he said, beginning to feel he had the upper hand in this game. "And how may I amuse you?"

Clarissa's eyes widened a little. It seemed the elf was getting his second wind! He certainly seemed to have lost all his shyness. She felt suddenly cold. Was he planning to enchant her? Well, no matter. If anyone could find the blackbirds, he would be the one, and she would risk even enchantment to protect her kingdom. However, she might do well to be wary.

"Would you -- would you play your flute for me?" she asked humbly.

Nicholas nearly laughed aloud. Apparently this sprite was not used to resistance in her visitors. Good then: he would show her that not all humans were superstitious milksops. He grinned at her as he turned the instrument in his hands.

"This isn't a flute," he said, "it's a whistle. But I have a flute in my pouch." He pulled it out and blew on it, then rubbed it with his sleeve.

"It's beautiful," said Clarissa. "I love music." She paused. She wanted very badly to jump the stream and sit on the soft moss of the glen - but would it be wise? And would the brown elf allow it? She squirmed as he polished his flute; the bracken on this side grew right up to the bank, and there were thorns sticking into her back. She took a deep breath.

"May I come across?" she asked in a small voice.

Nicholas felt a knot tighten slowly in his belly. This little sprite wanted trouble. Until now, there had been running water between them, and she was asking him to invite her across it! He opened his mouth for a sharp retort, and suddenly felt reckless. Why not invite her over! He would deal with her if she tried any tricks. He gave her another smile to show her that he knew what he was courting.

"Come ahead," he said.

Clarissa went cold again when she saw that smile, and her courage nearly failed, but she tossed her head. She was a princess! She took a flying leap and landed in a bundle on the opposite bank. She sat up hurriedly, brushing the grass from her skirt, and stared at the elf. He was very tan indeed, with very black hair, and he was smiling at her mockingly. She lifted her chin and put her hair back from her face with a little flick. She wasn't afraid!

Nicholas studied her curiously. Seen from closer, she looked more spritish than ever. Her hair had a sheen like still water;

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her skin was white, whiter than gipsy's lace, with the same sheen as her hair. Her eyes were tilted at the corners, like a tinker's, but she had a glow and a sparkle that no tinker maid could ever copy. And there was an air about her, a way of moving hands, of tipping the head, a lilt to the voice that made his fingers tingle. He recognized magic when he felt it: the house he had been born in had been chock full of it, especially on wide summer nights when the earth had seemed about to touch the star-crowded sky. The feeling was the same: there was magic at work here. He took a firmer grip on his flute, and looked away from those brown tilted eyes.

"Play for me," begged Clarissa, hugging her knees. She would probably be enchanted by the music and sit in the dell for two hundred years, like Mary Mallory of the High Downs, but that was certainly better than doing embroidery all afternoon! She watched, fascinated, as the lean brown fingers wove a pattern on the slim wooden shaft.

For two hours Nicholas played and Clarissa listened, and shadows lengthened across the glen. As the last light began to fade behind the hollies, they both looked up in alarm.

"I must run!" cried Clarissa, spring-

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ing to her feet. She jumped the brook and then paused. "Will--will you be back tomorrow?"

Nicholas was bewildered. The music seemed to have put a cloud over his mind. Why was she running off at sundown, as if he were the sprite? He shook his head, trying to clear it. Had she put a spell on him after all?

"Nay," he said slowly, "I'll not be back. I've my work to attend to." The words were heavy in his mouth, as if they were reluctant to be pronounced. What had she done to him?

Clarissa, who had half expected him to laugh and say, "Tomorrow! Why girl, you've been here nigh on two hundred years already!", was somewhat relieved to learn that she had not, after all, been enchanted, but this was quickly swallowed by disappointment. She wanted to see him again.

"Oh please!" she begged, and to her astonishment heard her voice saying, "I've never met an elf before!"

Nicholas' head cleared with the suddenness of a thunderclap.

"An elf?" he echoed. "I, an elf?" Surely she would know an elf if she saw one! But if she didn't, then she wasn't a sprite, and if she wasn't a sprite, who was she?

"You're not a wood sprite?" he asked

as calmly as he could.

"Me?" exclaimed Clarissa. She saw his expression and said, "You mean, you're not an elf after all?"

"I'm a saddlemaker for the King's stables," said Nicholas. Something was very strange here. The magic had not diminished in the glen; no, it was stronger than ever. Was she the source? Or was it the glen itself? But if she were not a sprite, what was she? A witch?

"Who are you?" he asked.

"I'm--" began Clarissa, and suddenly looked sly. "I'll tell you--tomorrow!" She turned and ducked into the bracken. The glade was suddenly silent.

"Wait!" called Nicholas. "What's your name?"

There was no answer. She was gone as suddenly as she had come, and strain as he would, he could hear no sounds of footsteps in the distance. With the silence came suddenly a feeling of overwhelming loss, so profound that he sat down with a shock. The tingle of magic in his fingertips still ran strong. But he had not sensed it at all until she had crossed the stream, so he could not blame it on the glade. Well, if the lass with the brown eyes had cast a spell on him, she would not get off so easily! He would reckon with her on the morrow.

TO BE CONTINUED

FANZINE REVIEW

MINAS TIRITH EVENING-STAR by Phil and Marci Helms, 4581 Glenalda Drive, Drayton Plains, MI 48020. 35¢/copy

Reappearing after several years and an assortment of titles, MTES now intends to remain "strictly Tolkien, with some dabbling at Lewis and closely related material." Like Mythril, MTES is a strictly fiction-and-poetry 'zine (tho' it does feature items of Tolkien interest such as a bio outline of JRRT, a note about the donation of Tolkien's desk to Help the Aged, an Oxford charity, and book reviews). It will utilize articles on Tolkien (about 2,500 words), short reviews of books by or about Tolkien, Tolkien-related fiction (to 5,000 words max.) and Tolkien-related poetry (to 3 pages single-spaced.)

MTES Yule 1974 offered two short stories, one by Marci ("DragonHunt") and the other by Phil Helms ("The Coming of Beorn.") Marci's story of an adventure by a party of Hobbit children had both read-aloud-ability and some good character studies. They find a dragon, but it belongs to a princess in a castle. When the warden, Rowann, appears, the children find themselves on the defensive. The story is gentle and should interest children, for certainly not a few of them could recognize themselves or their own friends in Oldo, Trillium and Hildifron.

"The Coming of Beorn" (illustrated by Phil) uses vivid, direct imagery and a gripping story line to describe the first encounter between the bear-man and the goblins of the Misty Mountains. His illustrations show the definite influence of S&S themes in the realistic modelling of musculature as well as in the costuming of the goblins. That the modelling should

appear so impressive is all the more remarkable, for MTES is entirely done in ditto, a process which requires any illo to be drawn directly upon the master.

The third major contribution is Tom Cook's poem, "Tom Bombadil Journeys to Mother Nature." The idea is sound; however, Tom has chosen a difficult meter. It is almost that of Tolkien's original Bombadil songs, but adds a syllable to each line that forces the eye to jump awkwardly. Otherwise, it's very pleasant to read. Note should be made of Phil Helms' "Law Notes," part of a series in which the "baddies" have their day in court, and a chance to complain about any legal irregularities by the "goodies." The case in this issue was Saruman vs. Gandalf: was Saruman de-staffed by proper impeachment procedure? For puzzle fen, there is a Tolkien word search. SIGN OF THE HAMMER by Phil and Marci Helms, same address and part of a projected stable of rotating 'zines. SoH will utilize fan fiction in the sword and sorcery, heroic fantasy or pure fantasy vein. Articles of interest on the field and characters within it, poetry with a suitable flavor, short book reviews, comment on Conan comics and other s&s, and heroic fantasy forays. Specs same as for MTES, except installments limited to 2,500 words each. First issue, Jan. 1975, 35¢/copy, 35-40 pages long like the other two 'zines.

SON OF SINISTER FORCE by Phil and Marcia Helms, fan fiction (to 3,00 words) in the science fiction and occult genres. Book reviews of material not suitable for MTES or SoH. Occult and Metaphysical articles along the lines of Liber Herbae or Liber Spirituum. "Anything else that strikes our fancies." Quarterly, like MTES and SoH, starting Feb. 1975. Specs otherwise the same, the Helmses want artwork as well. Check with them about copyright.

GUEST EDITORIAL--from p. 11

things are essentially inseparable. Each of them is the complete book separately; yet in the complete book all of them exist together. He can, by an act of the intellect, "distinguish the persons" but he cannot by any means "divide the substance". How could he? He cannot know the Idea, except by the Power interpreting his own Activity to him;

he knows the Activity only as it reveals the Idea in Power; he knows the Power only as the revelation of the Idea in the Activity. All he can say is that these three are equally and eternally present in his own act of creation, and at every moment of it, whether or not the act ever becomes manifest in the form of a written and printed book. These things are not confined to the material manifestation: they exist in--they are--the creative mind itself."

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